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Service senior enlisted leaders testify before House subcommittee

U.S. Air Force (Scott M. Ash)

The Enlisted Force *and* Profession of Arms

By BRYAN B. BATTAGLIA

What is it that makes membership in the U.S. profession of arms similar rather than different from other professions? While we all understand the need for professional segregation throughout ranks, specifically between the officer and enlisted corps, this segregation should be driven by virtue of rank structure, placement in professional military education, housing assignments, pay scale, and so forth—not driven by one group labeled professional and the other group labeled something other than professional. What makes us similar is that no matter what our rank, specialty, or discipline, we join, enlist, and enter into the same professional organization as bona fide members to perform specialized functions and missions in supporting something greater than ourselves—we become members of an organization that society believes is nothing short of a collective group of professionals.

There are those few who still argue that the only members in our uniformed profession are between the ranks of ensign and general. I stand with the majority of those who view such thinking as dated. This kind of thinking certainly held a bit more relevance many years ago when our enlisted personnel were less educated and less empowered—and, moreover, during a period when our

no matter what our rank, specialty, or discipline, we join, enlist, and enter into the same professional organization as bona fide member

military was not the all-volunteer force that it is today. I do not mean this statement in a condescending manner, but rather with the greatest respect for our former enlisted Servicemembers who served in times of greater challenge and with the utmost patriotism.

I am confident that the majority of our military leaders will concur that our non-commissioned officer (NCO)/petty officer corps easily fall within the realm of what we recognize today as a professional and authentic member in the profession of arms. To emphasize this point, it seems utterly contradictory for then-Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak to organize, develop, and implement the “strategic corporal” and at the same time consider that same NCO something other than professional or a member of the profession.

My challenge as an enlisted voice will be to articulate to some why the Specialist, Seaman, Private First Class, and Airman are also members of this profession, and thereby should be considered, treated, and held accountable as professionals. These warriors may operate and execute at a different level than that of their senior enlisted and officer corps, but nonetheless, we all play in the same league.

I am not speaking alone as I assert that all Servicemembers are professionals. We hold that a young man or woman who chooses to serve the Nation in this organization matters. Doing so equates a minute percentage of society’s youth who even meet the criteria to become a uniformed member in the first place. However, that alone cannot be the credential. The licensing validates itself when a Servicemember graduates from basic training. Tried and tested, that transformation marks an official commencement and membership in this profession of arms.

Are the police officers who graduate from the police academy and then walk their

first beat as rookie cops professional? Yes. Do they belong to a professional organization? Yes. Perhaps they do not match the experience of a police lieutenant with 25 years of experience on the force, but they are professionals nonetheless. The same analogy applies to an athlete brought onto a professional football team as a rookie quarterback. He does not equal the experience, stature, pay, responsibilities, popularity, or lucrative endorsement opportunities of the veteran quarterback, yet neither is less professional than the other—and both are accredited members in their profession.

I must also mention the position and stance of our Services’ senior enlisted advisors. We are all in agreement as to who are members of our profession. The “we” mentioned here also includes doctrinal publications—Service-owned and -operated. For example, let me make mention of the youngest of our Service branches and use the Air Force’s Professional Development Guide, signed and endorsed by its Chief of Staff. Discussing this topic with the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, it was easy for him to define as written in the development guide that *all* Airmen are professionals, and that point commences the moment one transforms from trainee to Airman. Identical responses from the other Services assert that the instant a trainee, recruit, or candidate surpasses the Service standard set forth by its institution and achieves that coveted title of Soldier, Marine, Sailor, Airman, or Coastguardsman marks the licensing into our profession of arms.

To further support “all-hands membership,” let me promote this in a more non-linear manner. To solely associate *military leader* when we define *members of the military profession* would be quite parochial. To an extent, we are all subordinate to someone, but junior Servicemembers who may not have leadership responsibilities by virtue of their rank or billet should not be a disqualifier to the membership or even question their status as a professional. I completely understand the commitment, hard work, cost, and sacrifice of our commissioned leaders to achieve a college degree (a credential) prior to accession and the subsequent requirement to pursue additional or advanced education while serving. It is partly the reason why we have the most highly educated and effective military officer corps in the world.



U.S. Army (Michael L. Casteel)
Army senior NCO directs Soldiers from landing zone during live-fire exercise near Basra, Iraq

Some may argue that one is either a professional or not. I argue that the all-or-nothing approach may not be our best option. So if we cannot come to grips with the Nation that everyone on the team is a member of the profession, maybe there is some maneuver room to categorize—not necessarily the marksman, sharpshooter, and expert design, but rather the rookie and veteran, the nurse and surgeon, and the policeman and commissioner. All are accredited members of their professions, just at significantly different levels as the junior professional and the senior professional. Surely a second lieutenant would not carry the same substance, experience, intellect, and education in the profession of arms as, for instance, General Martin Dempsey or one of the other four-star generals.

Lastly, while we attempt to clarify the definition of *professional* within our own military departments, we need not forget that we are a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. For the most part, 27 other countries look to us as the lead proponent in many functions and methods of operating across the span of the Alliance. So this position of leadership is another catalyst for us to make sure we get this right. Some nations are currently experiencing a massive upgrade of their enlisted corps. Some are ending conscription, while others have added more enlisted ranks. For example, the army of the Czech Republic considers all members professionals, and they take on that title during the swearing-in portion of accession. I am not endorsing that we stretch it that far for our own folks, but the message I carry to you today is that all of our Servicemembers are bona fide professionals in our profession of arms. **JFQ**

Sergeant Major Bryan B. Battaglia, USMC, is the Command Sergeant Major of U.S. Joint Forces Command.